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Redemption in Wagner: the Case of Senta

Michael Fuller



Senta dead, but also transfigured, in Paul Carr's 2013 production for Dorset Opera. Photo Patrick Frost Photography

It is a striking fact that in the mature works of Richard Wagner all but one of the main heroines dies shortly before, at, or soon after, the final curtain. Senta, Elisabeth, Elsa, Isolde, Sieglinde, Brünnhilde and Kundry all breathe their last in this way, the only heroine who (we may assume) survives for long past the end of a Wagnerian drama being Eva.¹ Why is this? What do the deaths of these women achieve? A key word often heard in this context is 'redemption': these women's deaths are in some way redemptive. Eva

Rieger notes in her study *Richard Wagner's Women* that Wagner treats the theme of redemption 'in an almost obsessive manner. We find it in all its possible forms, yet with one constant: it is always the woman who gives herself up for the man.'² As W.H. Auden memorably expressed it, in Wagner's work 'Woman, passive as in dreams/ Redeems, redeems, redeems, redeems'.³

However, it transpires that, *pace* Rieger and Auden, the word 'redemption' is not always the most appropriate term to use in this context. This article begins with an examination of the distinctive concepts rendered by the English words 'redemption', 'salvation' and 'atonement', which all have very specific theological resonances. It then considers the character of Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer*, whose death (it will be argued) may be seen as redemptive in a relatively straightforward way. The paper concludes by discussing the ways in which the linking of the character of Senta with

¹ The author wishes to extend his thanks to the Wagner Society of Manchester, in response to whose invitation the original version of this paper was prepared.

² Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner's Women* (Woodbridge, 2011), 40.

³ W.H. Auden, 'New Year Letter (January 1, 1940)', in *Collected Poems* (London, 1976), 236.

redemption has been explored in three recent productions of *Der fliegende Holländer*: those of Martin Kušej (Amsterdam, 2010), Jan Philipp Gloger (Bayreuth, 2013) and Florentine Klepper (Dresden, 2013). Recognising that modernist sensibilities find such theological terminology problematic, it will be noted that in these stagings directors have addressed the conclusion of this work by downplaying, subverting or reinterpreting the understanding of redemption which the work is presenting.

Terminology: Atonement, Salvation, Redemption

When thinking about how Wagner presents the concept of redemption in *Der fliegende Holländer*, the situation is complicated by the fact that English translations of Wagner's libretto are frequently inconsistent in their rendering of his German. Consider the key terms 'Heil' and 'Erlösung'. In the Act I monologue 'Die Frist ist um', the Dutchman says: 'Das Heil, das auf dem Land ich suche'. This appears in various English translations as follows: 'Once more I come to seek salvation' (David Pountney), 'The grace I seek on land' (Gwyn Morris), 'The redemption I seek on land' (Lionel Salter).⁴ In her Act II Ballad, Senta sings: 'Doch kann dem bleichen Manne Erlösung einstens noch werden', which in the same translations is rendered: 'One chance remains to gain this poor man his peace and salvation' (Pountney), 'But redemption may one day come to the pale man' (Morris), 'Yet there could be redemption one day for that pale man' (Salter).

It is immediately evident that the words 'Heil' and 'Erlösung' are each translated by both of the English words 'salvation' and 'redemption' (and a related theological term, 'grace', also appears, muddying the waters yet further). There are, of course, many purposes behind translations (Pountney's is intended specifically to be sung), and literal faithfulness to an original text can only be one factor in rendering it into another language, particularly when the text in question is a poetic one. But 'salvation' and 'redemption' (and 'grace'), and their German equivalents, do not mean the same thing: each is a distinct aspect of what in Christian theology is referred to as Atonement Theory. In this context, the English word 'salvation' is typically rendered in German as 'Heil', and 'redemption' as 'Erlösung'. ('Grace' is normally translated as 'Gnade', but this word does not in fact occur anywhere in the libretto of *Der fliegende Holländer*.) It might be argued that Wagner could himself have been using the words in a non-technical manner, since he was more concerned about their aural impact when set to music. Moreover, it hardly needs saying that Wagner's attitude to religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is complex (he famously stated at the outset of the essay 'Religion and Art' that it is for Art 'to save the spirit of religion by recognising the figurative value of the mythic symbols which [religion] would have us believe in their literal sense').⁵ However, it is surely not unreasonable to assume that Wagner was aware of the theological distinctions of the words he used, and that he deployed them

⁴ Translations taken from the following sources: Pountney: ENO/ROH Opera Guide to *Der Fliegende Holländer* (London, 1982); Morris: text accompanying Franz Konwitschny's recording of *Holländer* (EMI SLS 5226, 1960); Salter: Overture Opera Guide in association with ENO, *Der fliegende Holländer*, ed. G. Kahn (Richmond, UK, 2012).

⁵ *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, tr. and ed. William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols. (London, 1892–9; facsimile repr. 1993–5), vi.213.

accordingly; and this paper will assume that he did, and that his characters use words according to their traditional meanings.

Theological Background

Atonement Theory has been much discussed through the Christian centuries,⁶ so the following account is necessarily a very brief and broad-brush summary. Key to western Christian metaphysics is the idea that there is an estrangement between God and humankind. This estrangement is in part ontological – the divine and the human realms (so to speak) are so utterly different that there can be no equivalence between them. Human finitude is simply radically different to divine infinitude, making the very expression of the latter in terms utilised by the former an impossibility. (This lies behind the apophatic tradition found in eastern Christianity: the idea that we cannot give any true expression to ideas about what or who God is, since our words always fall short. We can only speak of God in terms of what God is not, since anything which our minds can grasp by definition falls short of describing true divinity.) Human estrangement from God is also in part a consequence of that rejection of, or disobedience to, the divine which is traditionally labelled sin.

Atonement – which literally means ‘at-one-ment’ – refers to a process by which this estrangement of the human and the divine is rectified, and the two are made as one. Within the Christian tradition, the means through which this happens is the divine initiative of the Incarnation: God became a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, thus bringing about the possibility of reconciliation of the human and the divine. (Indeed, as the 4th-century St Athanasius put it, ‘He was made man that we might be made God’;⁷ this is the process referred to in eastern Christianity as *theosis*, or ‘divinisation’.) Key to atonement is *grace*: this term having been introduced by one of our interpreters, we may note in passing that it refers to the understanding that the initiative in reconciling God and humankind is entirely the gracious gift of God.

Given that our present human condition is one of imperfection and decay, there is inevitably a sense that this is a condition which we might expect to transcend as we move closer to the God who is perfect and unchanging. By analogy with someone being rescued from something which imperils them, this has often been thought of in terms of our being ‘saved’, in the way that a person in peril is ‘saved’ by a rescuer. This, then, is the idea behind the concept of *salvation*: God is analogous to a rescuer, who reaches out to, and saves from their earthly lot, those individuals who turn to God. Salvation is the means through which atonement takes place; and the agent of salvation, in the Christian tradition, is of course Jesus Christ. (We may note that the German word ‘Heil’, which is used to render ‘salvation’, also carries connotations of health, wellbeing and wholeness: in saving us, God also renders us most fully the people we are able to be.)

What might prevent a human being from being saved in this way? This is traditionally ascribed to human recalcitrance, or reluctance to accept the divine salvific initia-

⁶ For a classic account of Atonement Theory, see F.W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (London, 1984); for a more recent treatment, see Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford, 2018).

⁷ St Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbum Dei* 54.3, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, ed., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (2nd series), iv. (Edinburgh, 1987), 65.

tive. This in turn gives rise to the notion that humans are 'in debt', and that a price must be paid for our salvation. Here we finally reach the concept of *redemption*: this is the idea that a price must be paid to enable a person to be saved – some kind of transaction is necessary to enable a person's salvation to occur. This has been variously understood, but one common understanding has been that humans are enslaved by forces opposed to God (personified in some traditions as the devil), and that a ransom must therefore be paid to the devil to free us from this slavery. In the Christian context, this payment is often thought of as being made by the sacrificial death of Jesus: a precedent is thereby set, which involves the death of an innocent individual in order to achieve the redemption of another.

Redeeming the Dutchman

With this theological background in place, let us return to *Der fliegende Holländer*. Senta's Ballad in Act II explains the Dutchman's plight: it is understood as arising from his stubbornly swearing that he will not give up an attempt to round a cape 'in Ewigkeit' (in eternity). Satan has taken him at his word, and so a situation has arisen in which it is as though the devil has a contract from which the Dutchman needs to be 'bought out'. The Dutchman therefore not only needs to be 'saved' but to be 'redeemed' as well: a price must be paid to set him free from this contact with Satan. Senta ends her Ballad by explicitly offering herself as the one whose faithfulness will redeem the Dutchman in this sense: 'Ich sei's, die dich durch ihre Treu' erlöse!' (It is I who will redeem you through faithfulness!), she says. There is, clearly, a profoundly theological dimension to *Der fliegende Holländer*; and Wagner's use of such terminology in his other libretti (most notably, of course, in *Parsifal*) suggests that such a dimension extends over other works as well.

It is noteworthy that there have been relatively few explicit engagements with Wagner's theology in recent literature on this composer (notable exceptions being the recent studies of Richard Bell on *Parsifal* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*,⁸ Roger Scruton's books on *Tristan und Isolde* and the *Ring* also deserve mention here,⁹ although they treat theological themes from a more philosophical point of view). However, there is an important recent study of *Der fliegende Holländer* which does take its theological aspects seriously, and that is Courtney W. Howland's feminist analysis of this opera.¹⁰

Howland defends the idea that there is an 'interpretive community' which shapes contemporary perspectives on Wagner's opera, involving 'shared interpretive strategies, conventions and dogma'.¹¹ She notes that 'the *Dutchman* canon has *chosen* to read the *Dutchman* in a particular and peculiar way that manifests and imposes a masculine-gaze

⁸ See Richard H. Bell, *Wagner's 'Parsifal': an Appreciation in the Light of his Theological Journey* (Eugene, OR, 2013); Bell, 'Teleology, Providence and the "Death of God": a New Perspective on the Ring Cycle's Debt to G.W.F. Hegel', *The Wagner Journal*, xi (2017), 30-45; Bell, *Theology of Wagner's 'Ring' Cycle* (2 vols: Eugene, OR, forthcoming).

⁹ See Roger Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde'* (Oxford, 2004); Scruton, *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's 'Ring of the Nibelung'* (London, 2016).

¹⁰ Courtney W. Howland, *A Feminist Perspective on Opera Interpretation: The Case of Wagner's 'Der fliegende Holländer'* (Zurich, 2014).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 132.



Senta (Lisbeth Balslev) pledges herself to the Dutchman (Simon Estes) in Harry Kupfer's 1978 production for Bayreuth, whereupon the accursed Dutchman's ship is transformed into a flowery love grotto.

element',¹² and comments that this canon both 'den[ies] Senta power and moral agency'¹³ and 'erases Senta's various social locations and fails to consider her perspective on events'.¹⁴ Importantly, she also notes that this interpretative canon generally ignores or does not explore the Christian context of the opera for interpretative analysis and 'meaning'. The dependence of the Dutchman's 'legend' on Christianity – indeed its symbiotic relationship with Christianity – is never discussed. Rather the 'legend' is interpreted, read, or simply taken for granted as a separate unreal story within the context of the 'real'

¹² Ibid., 123.

¹³ Ibid., 109.

¹⁴ Ibid., 113.

story of the opera itself. The result is that the canon ignores the religious aspects of the opera, and consequently that Senta may easily be read as a Christ figure.¹⁵

Howland's conclusion here requires slight qualification, but her comments on the idea of a traditional canon of interpretation of *Der fliegende Holländer*, and the assumptions made by those writing within the framework of that canon, are highly illuminating. We might perhaps even go so far as to elaborate her analysis by saying that this traditional canon imposes a masculine secularist gaze; and we do not need to search hard in the literature to come across this gaze. For example, Thomas Grey writes: 'Senta's character is conceived as an apotheosis of the domestic "angel" of Biedermeier and Victorian social ideals',¹⁶ and that 'the Ballad is presented as a piece of popular superstition'¹⁷ – and this is despite the fact that, as Howland points out, 'the ballad is no more fiction for Senta and the village women spinners than is Christianity; they believe in both equally'.¹⁸ Although the terms 'salvation' and 'redemption' are both used by Grey, there is no reference to Christianity in his analyses. Rather, he suggests that 'Wagner may have hoped that he could redeem the genre [of German Romantic opera], as Senta redeems the Dutchman'.¹⁹ Such a vague approach removes all theological content from the terms used, and renders them near-meaningless.

Another important insight in Howland's reading of *Der fliegende Holländer* is her noting of the ways in which the words 'Liebe' and 'Treue' ('love' and 'faithfulness') are used in the libretto. She observes: 'Senta (contrary to most readings of the opera) never expresses "love" (*Liebe*) for anyone in the opera: not for the Dutchman and not for Erik'.²⁰ Rather, 'the exegesis of the libretto demonstrates that Senta is identified solely with *Treue*'.²¹ Howland maintains that 'Senta's *Treue*, without expectation of reciprocity, combined with her offering it solely for the purpose of religious salvation and redemption, is what makes her Christ-like. It is crucial for Senta as a Christ-figure that she must die to redeem the Dutchman'.²²

Although the situation is by no means as clear-cut as it is with 'Liebe' and 'Treue', there is a similar differentiation in the libretto of *Der fliegende Holländer* in the use of the words 'Heil' and 'Erlösung'. The Dutchman sings throughout of his desire for 'Heil', using the word 'Erlösung' on just three occasions: in his Act I Monologue, when he is addressing his promised 'angel', in his Act II duet with Senta when they sing the word together, and in his penultimate outburst in Act III, when he refers specifically to the woman who can redeem him. (It is, perhaps, ironic that an individual who makes a living from trade tends not to think about his 'Erlösung', this being after all a pecuniary concept.) For the Dutchman, there is to be an agent for his salvation, but the agent is secondary to the salvation itself. Senta, in contrast, refers frequently to the Dutchman's

¹⁵ Ibid., 113.

¹⁶ Thomas Grey, 'Wagner and *Der fliegende Holländer*', in Thomas Grey, ed., *Richard Wagner: 'Der fliegende Holländer'* (Cambridge, 2000), 1–24, here 14–15.

¹⁷ Thomas Grey, 'Der fliegende Holländer and its generic contexts', *ibid.*, 65–91, here 75.

¹⁸ Howland, *Feminist Perspective* (note 10), 172.

¹⁹ Grey, 'Generic Contexts' (note 17), 91.

²⁰ Howland, *Feminist Perspective* (note 10), 33.

²¹ Ibid., 41.

²² Ibid., 101 (*italics in original*).



Senta (Catherine Naglestad) and the Dutchman (Juha Uusitalo) alone with the sea in Martin Kušej's Amsterdam production. Photo Hans van den Bogaard

need for 'Erlösung' – indeed, as we have seen, at the end of her *Ballad* she refers to herself as the one who will bring it. It is as though her personal investment in the process of the Dutchman's redemption is complete, whilst he sees in her a more generic saviour-figure: a means to an end, whose personal identity as Senta is irrelevant.

It is this specificity of Senta's redemptive vocation (if we may put it like that) which might be argued to militate against Howland's understanding of her as a Christ-figure. Senta's sacrifice is seen, both by herself and by the Dutchman, as bringing

about the redemption of one individual, whilst in the Christian tradition Christ's sacrifice redeems the whole of humankind. But it is certainly clear that Senta's death is a redeeming one, in that she sees it as paying to Satan what is owed for him to relinquish his hold on the Dutchman.

(We may note here in parentheses that the case of Senta is in this respect rather more straightforward than those of most of Wagner's other heroines. If we were to ask what debt is being paid, and to whom, to achieve the redemption of another person in the cases of *Isolde* or *Kundry* (for example), it is unclear whether these are even sensible questions to ask. A possible exception here is *Brünnhilde*, whose death as she returns the ring to the Rhinemaidens might be seen as paying back the debt incurred by Wotan in his theft of the gold; it might be argued that Wotan is redeemed by her actions.)

In an interesting recent article, Bortnichak and Bortnichak suggest that insofar as Senta carries divine attributes, she 'might be seen [...] as the personification of the now nearly forgotten Great Goddess of our ancient Old European ancestors'.²³ They maintain that Jan Philipp Gloger's recent Bayreuth production (of which more below) portrays her as a 'creative force' in a way which is consonant with such an understanding. But they do not locate Senta's redemptive death within such a 'Great Goddess' understanding, and this aspect of her character clearly sits more comfortably within a straightforwardly Christian narrative.

Staging Redemption

These are complex ideas, which are being expressed in a work for the operatic stage. How might they be presented in ways which make sense to a 21st-century western audience, which is removed both from the Romantic era in which Wagner composed his work, and from a ready understanding of the theological ideas which lie behind it? As Thomas Grey puts it, 'what *are* we to make of all the talk about redemption, finally,

²³ Edward A. Bortnichak and Paula M. Bortnichak, 'Redeeming Senta', *The Wagner Journal*, xiii/1 (2019), 22–9, here 28.

and how *is* redemption to be staged?²⁴ In particular, how might a contemporary staging portray Senta's death?

As is well known, Wagner made a number of alterations to *Der fliegende Holländer*, from its earliest performances onwards.²⁵ Of these the most striking changes were those made in 1860 to the endings of the overture and of the opera itself, which introduce a transfigured version of the theme associated with Senta, including a soaring four-note figure in the violins, as well as a harp and a richer soundworld more typical of Wagner's later works. This later 'redemptive' ending of the opera makes a sharp contrast with the abrupt, percussive ending of the original score. The earlier ending can be seen and heard on the celebrated recording of Harry Kupfer's production of *Der fliegende Holländer* made at Bayreuth in 1985, which conceived the piece as Senta's dream. In this production Senta is seen as a neurotic: Kupfer's interpretation may be considered a classic example of a 'masculine gaze' reading of her as a 'dreamy insane-in-love woman', as Howland puts it.²⁶ Kupfer ends his production with a stark portrayal of Senta's suicide, making a brutal conclusion to a brutal understanding of the opera. Several more recent productions have similarly opted for this abrupt ending, for example those of Tim Albery (Covent Garden, 2009), Jonathan Kent (English National Opera, 2012/Royal Opera Copenhagen, 2014), Andreas Homoki (Opernhaus Zurich, 2013) and Olivier Py (Theater an der Wien, 2015). It is a conclusion that can easily be made to harmonise with an understanding of the opera that plays down its character as a tale of redemption.

It is striking, though, that many productions have preferred to use the later, 'redemptive' ending, despite the challenges it presents if one is to avoid the theological complexities sketched out above. Three recent productions, in responding to this challenge, have offered richly contrasting views of what is happening at the point when Senta dies, and when those final 'redemptive' bars of music sound out from the orchestra.

Case studies: Martin Kušej, Jan Philipp Gloger, Florentine Klepper

Martin Kušej (Amsterdam, 2010): Redemption Ignored

Martin Kušej's production is set in a cosmopolitan present-day location.²⁷ The gaudily dressed Daland, crew and villagers perceive the black-clad Dutchman and his crew as threatening through their being immigrants, outsiders, in the community in which they find themselves. In Act II Senta stands apart from the rest of the women, who are seen relaxing at some kind of spa whilst she sits at a traditional spinning-wheel. (This scene recalls Peter Konwitschny's celebrated 2006 Munich production, in which the female chorus in Act II is presented 'spinning' on exercise bikes in a gym.) Hoodie-clad members of the Dutchman's crew are seen from time to time, but are completely ignored by the women, who are focused entirely on beautifying themselves: Senta alone sympathises with them in their plight. At the conclusion of Act III Erik shoots the Dutchman, believing him to be about to run off with Senta, and then, as she stands

²⁴ Grey, 'Wagner and *Der fliegende Holländer*' (note 16), 14 (italics in original).

²⁵ These changes are summarised in John Deathridge, 'An Introduction to *Der fliegende Holländer*', *Overture Opera Guide to 'Der fliegende Holländer'* (note 4), 17–33, esp. 32–3.

²⁶ Howland, *Feminist Perspective* (note 10), 154.

²⁷ This production may be seen on DVD: Opus Arte OA1049D (Blu-ray: OABD7084D).

defiantly beside the dying man, Erik shoots Senta herself. The redemptive ending then plays, accompanying a stage which is bare apart from their two bodies.

In Kušej's presentation there is no room to address issues like salvation and redemption. He has presented contemporary western society, with painful accuracy, as one which focuses on superficial materialism and which ignores and rejects 'outsiders', and this world ultimately rejects not only the Dutchman, but also Senta, as someone who does not fit in with its norms. It is a world which has forgotten both a duty of responsibility to others and the hope of any form of salvation – a truly 'post-Christian' world, with an uncaring, hedonistic focus on the here-and-now. The Dutchman is an intruder, whose presence and untimely demise are to be overlooked; whilst Senta's death is an aberration, to be ignored – as is any wider significance that her death might have in terms of the redemption of another. Kušej presents us with redemption ignored, as something irrelevant.

Jan Philipp Gloger (Bayreuth 2013): Redemption Commodified

Jan Philipp Gloger's recent Bayreuth staging²⁸ takes Kušej's critique of the contemporary world into an imagined near-future. It is a savage critique of capitalism, achieved through offering us a glimpse into the hell in which the Dutchman is living. The original Dutchman was, of course, a trader: Gloger takes us straight to the heart of what that might mean for such a figure today, by presenting the Dutchman as a cyborg – a human with machine implants. Gloger explains that the story of the Dutchman refusing to give up his attempt to round a cape means that:

the Dutchman does not accept the limits set by nature, it's a case of hubris. It is interesting that the aim of the early global seafarers was not only the exploration of the world, but also, above all, the development of new trading routes. [...] that the cultivation of power with the empty goal of the sheer accumulation of capital becomes a self-defining aim, that is perhaps the fate of the Dutchman as we see him. This way of life is a virus that has infected the Dutchman.²⁹

As Bortnichak and Bortnichak put it, 'he is the ultimate alienated posthuman technocrat, emotionally dead yet kept physically viable beyond his natural time by computer chip biologics with obvious electronic ports covering his body, and flush with paper money, to which he no longer attaches any value, in the pockets of his impeccable, if nondescript, black business suit'.³⁰ The sets stress the ways in which the Dutchman is tied to the industrial-mercantile complex which has created him: thus the set for the first act is some kind of infernal stock exchange, where lights flicker and dials ratchet up the numbers, and that for the second act is a factory. The Dutchman is aware of the hell in which he lives, and yearns to escape it (we see him trying to slit his wrists

²⁸ This production is also available on DVD: Opus Arte OA1140D (Blu-ray: OABD7147D).

²⁹ Jan Philipp Gloger, 'Two Outsiders Yearning for Another Life: An Interview with Jan Philipp Gloger', Bayreuther Festspiele: Programmheft, *Der fliegende Holländer* (2018), 41–44, here 42.

³⁰ P.M. Bortnichak and E.A. Bortnichak, 'Jan Philipp Gloger's *Flying Dutchman* at Bayreuth: A Study of the Posthuman Frankenstein Monster', Bayreuther Festspiele: Programmheft, *Der fliegende Holländer* (2016), 47–56, here 51. This paper is also available on the website of *The Wagner Journal*: <[http://www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk/suppl.page\(holla.html\)](http://www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk/suppl.page(holla.html))> (accessed 19 Nov. 2019).



Mary (Christa Mayer) and Senta (Adrienne Pieczonka) dispute in the electric fan factory in Jan Philipp Gloger's Bayreuth production. Photo Bayreuther Festspiele/Enrico Nawrath

during 'Die Frist ist um'). However, such clarity is beyond the other characters, who have bought into that hell, in which everything is commodifiable and carries a price tag.

The full extent of what this means may be seen by the fact that the factory is making electric fans (or, more accurately, not making them – that would require some kind of creative input, however mundane – but rather, simply packaging them). Fans represent a mechanisation of wind; and, in New Testament Greek, the same word (*πνεῦμα*, *pneuma*) stands for both 'wind' and 'spirit'. The factory represents the ultimate reductionist-capitalist vision: the mechanisation and commodification of spirit. This production represents the triumph of the western capitalist mentality, seen as something into which the people have smilingly bought (and there is much smiling – most of it all-too-obviously fake smiling – in this production, on the part of Daland, the Steersman and the chorus. Are they perhaps unconsciously aware of the fake happiness they have been persuaded to swap for reality?).

Apart from the Dutchman himself, the only person to stand outside the crowd is, of course, Senta. She is trying to reach beyond the fake, commercial context which has beguiled the other characters. Her creation of an atavistic fetish signals her awareness of an alternative to the blinkered mentality of her contemporaries, and it is this vision, which she alone possesses, which enables her to be the one who can save the Dutchman from his fate. At the conclusion of Act III Senta stabs herself, at which point the Dutchman realises that his body, too, has become susceptible to death. However, Gloger has one last, terrible surprise in store. Senta's sacrifice, and the deaths of her and the Dutchman, might point the way for others, too, to escape the unthinking hell in which they are trapped. However, such is the invading, corrupting power of capitalism that it can destroy even that possibility. The curtain falls after their deaths, and then rises again in the final bars to reveal the factory again, now dedicated to producing kitsch statuettes of Senta and the Dutchman in their final embrace. Even something as visceral and salvific as self-sacrificing love and loyalty can be turned into a vapid commercial opportunity. Never can the 'redemptive' ending of the opera have sounded more ironically.



Senta as a child clings to the Dutchman's knees in Florentine Klepper's Dresden production. Photo Semperoper Dresden/Klaus Gigga

Gloger's production is a scathing attack on the capitalist values which are accepted unquestioningly by many in the west today. Those values can assimilate and neutralise any possible threat by commodifying and turning to profit even those threats themselves. The Dutchman – whose longevity is now bound up with his cyborg nature – recognises that such an existence is an accursed one, and longs to escape it. It is only Senta, who is sufficiently 'outside' this world to be groping towards alternative value systems, who has the vision to enable such an escape, and together (we may assume) they achieve it in their deaths. But Gloger's ending pulls up the ladder behind them by showing how the very world they seek to escape can swallow up the means for escaping it, by reducing those means to terms which rest inside its own value system. Gloger presents us with redemption subverted within a system that has set aside values in favour of prices: redemption commodified.

Florentine Klepper (Dresden, 2013): Redemption Reinterpreted

Florentine Klepper's production of *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Semperoper in Dresden depicts a small-town fishing community, in which the Senta of the opera is pre-

sented alongside herself as a little girl. Klepper's staging begins with a funeral procession and the interment of a coffin: from later events, we may infer that this funeral is that of Daland. As the action unfolds we witness the unhappy upbringing of Senta in a community espousing a highly traditional understanding of women as wives and mothers, from which she recoils: we see her abused by fishermen as a small child, and surrounded by a chorus of 'Stepford wives', identically dressed and devoted to lives of motherhood. She clings instead to a vision of an 'outsider'-figure who can set her free from this situation: indeed, when the Dutchman makes an appearance, the child Senta clings to his knees, in a way that Erik relates seeing in his dream. In the end, the death of her father and the departure of both Erik (her real-life pursuer) and the Dutchman (her fantasy-figure) set Senta free to leave her oppressive environment behind. In this production, at the point where Senta dies she is simply left alone on stage, as the other characters in the drama walk backwards off it. As the 'redemptive' ending is played, Senta puts on an overcoat, picks up a suitcase, and leaves town for a brighter future.

Klepper's interpretation preceded Howland's book by a year, but they are clearly cut from the same analytical cloth, adopting Howland's 'feminist-gaze' reading of the opera. In the context of the small-town community she presents to us, the figure in need of saving from their intolerable existence is no longer the Dutchman, but Senta herself. Multiple deaths, both real and figurative, might be said to pay the price to enable this to come about: those of Senta's father, of the Dutchman (who has held up before Senta's imagination a vision of an alternative reality, but who is no longer required once she has resolved to move on with her life), and of Erik (whose unwelcome advances she has successfully rebuffed). It is Senta, then, for whom the redemptive music sounds at the end of the opera: she is no longer the agent, but rather the recipient of redemption. Her salvation is perhaps being viewed more in anthropological than theological terms, as she is being set free from bondage to social norms rather than from those things which are preventing her engagement with the Divine. But insofar as one kind of freedom may presage or be symbolic of another, it is none the less moving for that. Klepper presents us with redemption reinterpreted, in a manner that is both ingenious and thought-provoking.

Conclusion

There has been much discussion of Wagner's portrayal of salvation and redemption in his operas, particularly with regard to the role played by women in them, though much of this discussion has been insufficiently focused. In the case of Senta, however, it does seem that Wagner intended her redemptive actions to effect the salvation of the Dutchman. And in the 21st-century west, when the ideas of salvation and redemption lack the common currency they once had, fresh interpretations of Wagner's opera are exploring ingenious ways in which to reinterpret those ideas, and also to offer critiques of contemporary society. The 'message' of Wagner's work may have become more complex, but its ongoing relevance can hardly be in doubt.

